



Qu'est-ce que la Nouvelle Vague?

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the abdication of any right to explanation at all. It may be that the concentration on action and technique, at the cost of explanation and motivation in the work of French directors, is itself a sort of avoidance of content, a begging the question even, and that on this plane they meet their less advanced brethren elsewhere.

But it is characteristic that, of all of them, the one who had most to say about forbidden things like war and peace, atom bombs and human suffering, is also the one who has, in effect, said most, and most interestingly, in (and about) the cinematic idiom itself. Perhaps what Resnais understood (consciously or not) is that the prob-

lem today rests in the synthesis of man's personal and social concerns. Social criticism is good for a book, and so is adultery, and so is first love. But in life they go together, mixed as the elements of a cake; for those who live them are men and women, complex and complicated, hungry and happy and apprehensive at the same time, working and loving and buying a newspaper and shooting a glance at a passing blonde all at the same time. A slice of reality—since that is all the artist can hope to cope with—a slice of reality is a slice of a mixture, not the artificial isolation of one of its many components.

Qu'est-ce que la Nouvelle Vague?

NOEL BURCH

Originally, the term *nouvelle vague*, as popularized by the snappy, left-wing weekly *l'Express*, did not refer to the cinema at all, but to the generation of forward-looking youth (mostly professional people, business men, and students) who were supposed to gather 'round Mendès-France and bring new ideas into French political life. Subsequent events have, unfortunately, emptied the phrase of most of its social and political meaning, leaving a handy catch-word in the air when it came time to put a label on the truly remarkable movement which began in French films last year—in the sudden rise of a sizable number of amazingly young directors (the *average* age of the directors discussed in this article is 32). In films, however, the new wave is primarily a commercial phenomenon, and only incidentally an idealistic one. At the Cannes stock-market last spring, the French producer who did not have his young Frenchman to sell was simply wasting his time; foreign distributors were interested in almost no other commodity, and they paid some pretty fancy prices. One is reminded of the run on Italian neorealism just after the war. But, unlike the first neorealist films, those

of the new wave are just as popular at home as abroad: a half dozen of the biggest first-run houses in Paris have been tied up fairly regularly for the last six months by the new generation. Just how, one may wonder, did this state of affairs come about?

In the first place, the older generation was undoubtedly beginning to show serious signs of fatigue; their films were costing more and more and, with a very few brilliant exceptions, were bigger and bigger flops; moreover a certain generation of actors no longer interested the public. (In France the tendency to use the same actors over and over again is stronger, perhaps, than in any other country—a tendency to which the new directors are no exception.) In the face of this situation, a few producers and a few young directors (most of them with private fortunes) decided that the time was ripe to start making those films that they (the directors, of course) had been wanting to make for so long, *and to make them cheaply*. As in every Western country, film-making in France is far too costly; it is an industry which tolerates a form of conspicuous consumption and even downright waste which simply could not exist

in any other commercial enterprise. The reasons for this are multiple, and beyond the scope of this article, but the remedies are so simple that a bit of good will is all that is required to apply them in France. Not that all the young directors drastically cut the costs of their films, but while few of them cost as little as Chabrol's first feature, *Le Beau Serge* (35,000,000 francs or \$72,000), most of them cost less than 100,000,000—\$206,000, whereas previously the average "quality" film—with the foreign distribution guarantees that this word generally implies—cost at least half as much again.

Who are the *nouvelle vague* directors? One of the most striking features of this generation is that almost none of them has behind him the career as assistant-director or short film-maker which hitherto were *sine qua non* conditions to becoming a director in France. As we shall see, however, this "fresh approach" has major disadvantages. Another striking fact is that at least six of these young men belong—or belonged—to the staff of France's leading film monthly, *Les Cahiers du Cinéma*. In this respect, the "*nouvelle vague*" bears an interesting resemblance to the "*cinéma d'art*" movement in the nineteen-twenties (Epstein, Delluc, *et al.*) who also came to films directly from journalism. There is, however, a basic difference between these two generations, for whereas the critic-turned-director in that heroic age of cinema was primarily concerned with aesthetic problems—which was all to his credit even though his solutions were less interesting than the Russians' or the Germans'—his 1959 successors are primarily concerned with *moral values*. A recent consensus of opinion taken among the staff members of *Les Cahiers* revealed that for many, though not all of them, the greatest film of all time is Hitchcock's *Under Capricorn*, while another film high on their lists is Rossellini's *Journey to Italy*. Now I know it will be hard for intelligent Americans to understand why two such insipid, mediocre films should be so highly prized by the *Cahiers* group—that is, by a goodly portion of the "forward-looking" new wave. Briefly, one may say that they are fascinated, on the one

hand, by the "moral" (read "Christian") themes treated in these films—the idea of sacrifice in the first and of redemption in the second—and, on the other, by their rather crude and, in the case of Rossellini's film, frankly awkward technique; for, above all, these young, intelligent critics, though they probably know more about how films are really made than the critics of any other country, nevertheless somehow feel that technique is a dangerous thing—perhaps because they see it as leading to academicism or, far worse, to what they would call formalism.

One of the most typical films of this "school within a school" (because it sums up neatly the whole *Cahiers* attitude toward the function of film art) was Jacques Rivette's short, *Le Coup du Berger*. This film may also be considered the first manifestation of the new wave, as it preceded Malle's and Chabrol's films by a couple of years. I can best describe it to English-speaking readers by saying that, dubbed into English, it could easily have been used to make *Quartet* into a "Quintet." The story—a husband foils his wife's attempt to make him believe she found a fur coat given her by her lover, and avenges himself by filching the coat and presenting it to his mistress—is an almost perfect pastiche of Somerset Maugham, and is just about as profound. Its French literary origins, however, are more significant: if not actually an adaptation of a Diderot tale, the form and spirit of *Le Coup du Berger* are those of an eighteenth-century

LE COUP DU BERGER: *Virginie Vitry and Jean-Claude Brialy.*



conte moral. Here, I feel, lies the key not only to Rivette's attitude but to Truffaut's and Chabrol's as well. They look upon films as an instrument with which to comment upon the mores of Man and Society—to "philosophize," that is, in the sense that Diderot and D'Alembert gave this term. Now, when one recalls Diderot's attitude toward form in art (his feeling about the relative merits of Chardin and Greuze, for example) one is not too surprised at the formal indigence of these young men's work.

Actually *Le Coup du Berger*, though deliberately academic in both form and texture, does display considerable economy of means. Rivette, alone among the *Cahiers* group, seems to have acquired a real mastery of academic film technique, practically without ever having set foot on a sound stage, and this is certainly to his credit. He is now completing his first feature, but unfortunately I do not have the impression that he ever intends to transcend this technique and set out to discover the truth of films, as several of his contemporaries have had the courage to do.

Aside from his relative technical proficiency, Rivette has the added merit of having shot two films, one short and one feature, on practically nonexistent budgets (I say "shot" because producers have stepped in to finance the post-synchronization and cutting of both films, which

proves that his shoestring methods pay off). Claude Chabrol, on the other hand, has money, and there is no doubt but what his approach to films is somewhat that of a dilettante. Chabrol was "never anyone's assistant" either, and is terribly proud of the fact. I'm afraid he has no cause, for the total lack of formal unity displayed by his films shows that the years spent at the *Cinémathèque* taught him nothing save what I expect he calls a "healthy" contempt for academic technique. This contempt, however, is healthy only for those who have assimilated—and thoroughly assimilated—the secrets of this technique, who know *why*, for example, two shots of the same field meant to be matched in the cutting-room should normally be shot at angles separated by at least thirty degrees. Unquestionably, true film art lies *beyond* this and other rules, but only for those who know how and when to break them; when Chabrol breaks them out of hand simply because *il s'en fout*, the result is merely jarring and, above all, *amorphous*. For, though it is only fair to point out one interesting formal contribution in Chabrol's *Les Cousins*—an inventive apartment set handled with a certain sense of spatial ambiguity through camera movement—the word "amorphous" is, I feel, the key to both his and Truffaut's films. They want at all costs to avoid the slick textural and structural academicism of their hated elders (Autant-Lara, Becker, and the rest) and make a conscious, though by no means sustained effort to reject tried and true solutions, but when it comes to replacing these with solutions of their own, they fall down completely. Chabrol has nothing to offer save an occasional stroke of "genius" which is never less than incongruous (his cutting to a reverse-field shot with short, gratuitous, lateral dolly movements on either side of the splice was meant, I suppose, to underline a rather trivial declaration of juvenile love, but it is not everyone who can invent convincing neologisms). Truffaut's substitute for a personal style is even weaker: it consists of "quotations" from film classics (*L'Arroseur Arrosé* in *Les Mistons* and *Zéro de Conduite* in *Les 400 Coups*) and other extra-



LES COUSINS: "Minne" (Claude Cerval)
sowing the seeds of doubt in the mind of
"Brunnhilde" (Juliette Meyniel).

LES 400 COUPS:
Zero for conduct.



cinematic effects. And though this first appearance of allusion to film-history in films themselves may be an interesting token of the art's new-found sophistication (as are the pastiche sequences in some of Bergman's films), it is fully as gratuitous as the systematic Siegfried parallel in *Les Cousins*, or the "quotations" found in the worst neoclassical Stravinsky. For the rest, Truffaut takes care to plug his pals' films; the protagonists of *Les Mistons* attend a showing of *Le Coup du Berger*, those of *Les 400 Coups* go to Le Gaumont Palace (!) to see Rivette's forthcoming *Paris Nous Appartient*.

On the level of subject matter the films of Truffaut, Chabrol – and even Rivette – have another trait in common which merely confirms their immaturity and amateurism: all are frankly autobiographical, and have that undisciplined quality of first novels by second-rate writers.

And while autobiography per se may not necessarily be a hindrance to art, even great art (see Proust and Joyce), in the hands of minor talents it generally serves as a means of avoiding structural problems and, above all, the problem of *choice* inherent in any true creation, by substituting ready-made, "real-life" situations for the artificial and therefore more demanding ones of art. Both Truffaut's short, *Les Mistons*, and his feature, *Les 400 Coups* are autobiographical, and while the former, it is true, is an adaptation of a short story by the slickly superficial Maurice Pons,* the latter is an almost literal account of Truffaut's difficult childhood (resembling a poor man's watered-down version of *Death on the Installment Plan*). Chabrol's scripts are less literally autobiographical, and more frankly moralizing; they deal with such simplistic situations as "the country mouse versus the city rat"

* It is, I feel, a further indication of the way their minds work that the writers whom the vast majority of these young directors choose to adapt or collaborate with are among the most inconsequential and aesthetically conservative in France: Pons, Roger Nimier, Louise de Vilmorin, Georges Schéhadé, Paul Gégau, Marcel Moussy, Roger Vailland, and Sagan. One might imagine that such "daring" directors would be more interested in enlisting the aid of men like Beckett, Ionesco, Robbe-Grillet, Audiberti, Vauthier, or even Genet.

(*Les Cousins*) or “a saint among the infidels” (*Le Beau Serge*) (which ultimately constitute, nevertheless, a devastating portrait of Chabrol’s intellect). The strictly autobiographical character of his films is betrayed by his choice of incidents, milieux, props, and locations; one feels that a particular piece of bric-a-brac or a particular variety of card game have been thrown in because they are part of Chabrol’s everyday existence and not by virtue of any aesthetic necessity.

I do not think that Chabrol and Truffaut have deliberately sold their souls to the devil, as certain young left-wing critics, and certain young film-makers less fortunate than they, have claimed; they are probably making the films they want to make, but anyone who claims that theirs are any better or, above all, any more “advanced” than, let us say, the highly respectable *Diable au Corps*, is simply deluding himself. It is true that in so far as they choose “serious” subjects—most of their films deal with youth in a far more sophisticated way than Carné’s lamentable *Tricheurs*—they are not disgracing the French cinema and have, in fact, slightly raised the average *intellectual* level of French films; but it would be pure hokum to

LE BEAU SERGE: The final “Calvary” scene.
Jean-Claude Brialy and Gérard Blain.



claim that these young men are working any kind of aesthetic revolution, for technically—and, above all, poetically—their films are a good twenty years behind the time.

Much of what has gone before can be applied to Louis Malle, whose film *Les Amants* was the first big commercial success of the new generation; it was he who first made the producers sit up and take notice. Malle, however, never wrote for *Les Cahiers*, and he had had some professional experience prior to making his first film, *Ascenseur pour l'Echafaud*. He is the only member of the new wave to have graduated from the official French film school, the IDHEC. After that, he spent two years on the *Calypso* with Commandant Cousteau making underwater films, and though this activity may seem rather far afield from studio direction, almost any prolonged contact with the film medium is enough to give an intelligent artist (and Malle, I think, is one) insight into its essential mechanisms. His first film, though frankly a stylistic exercise—it was based on a particularly trashy suspense novel—contained real promises. The scenes showing the hero trapped in an elevator-cage were almost Bressonian in their intense treatment of minute gesture, and Jeanne Moreau’s long walk down the Champs-Élysées by night was unquestionably an excellent mood piece. The film was rigorously put together, and though marred by a few incongruous bits of bravura (such as a police interrogation shot against a black backdrop) it nevertheless gave high hopes for the future of this very young director (he was not yet twenty-five at the time). Unfortunately those hopes were utterly dashed by the incredible, academic formlessness of *Les Amants*. Knowing that Malle was absolutely free to direct as he chose, I cannot understand how he could feel that this unbelievably flat film, hardly redeemed by a rather sympathetic but aesthetically tame love scene, constituted an improvement over *Ascenseur pour l'Echafaud*. Either Malle simply decided to play it safe—an attitude which would be reprehensible in view of his particularly privileged financial situation—or else he too is contemptuous of form, and the experimentation in his first film was merely a way of amusing himself

until he was free to choose his own subjects. (A similar attitude on the part of a Hollywood director once produced a minor masterpiece: Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me, Deadly*, which its author disavowed when he began making his dismal "message" films.) In any case, if we argue, as I think we must, that only through a conscientious concern for form is it possible to make a vital contribution to film art today, Malle must be written off along with Chabrol and Truffaut.

As I have implied, Chabrol and Truffaut are not the only *Cahiers* critics who belong to the new wave. Alexandre Astruc, though chronologically not a bona fide member of the movement—his first film dates from 1952—once wrote for that journal too, and while he has since broken with it, he still shares its preoccupation with moral values in cinema. His first two films—*Le Rideau Cramoisi* and *Les Mauvaises Rencontres*—are hardly worth recalling, but his recent adaptation of Maupassant's *Une Vie*, though rather openly inspired by *Senso*, did have some of the "melodramatic rigor" of Visconti's masterpiece. Astruc bears serious watching (even though his latest project involves a script by—Françoise Sagan!).

Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, current editor, and Jean Luc-Godard and Eric Rohmer, both regular contributors to *Les Cahiers du Cinéma*, round out this magazine's participation in the new wave. Though all three have made a number of shorts, those I have seen are worth little discussion; while anything is possible, of course, I doubt that the three features they are now completing are likely to prove very exciting.

Far more promising, I find, is the work of the youngest member of the new wave, Jean-Daniel Pollet (he is 23). Although his short subject *Pourvu qu'on ait l'ivresse* (literally: "Provided there be drunkenness") was formally as banal as *Les 400 Coups*, its ferociously realistic description of a provincial dance hall betokened genuine artistic talent and a real need to create—whereas one vaguely feels that Truffaut and Chabrol make films because it has become the thing to do. The film is a microscopic study of an extremely ugly boy's inner sexual torment as he tries to summon the courage to ask a girl—

any girl—to dance, and Pollet's direction of an extraordinarily talented but completely unknown actor makes this one of the most penetratingly humanistic films of recent years. To what degree the dance-hall atmosphere is unstaged, it is hard to tell, but occasionally Pollet's handling of it displays great emotional—if not formal—discipline. At other times he lapses into rather self-indulgent and conventional orgies of fast cutting—particularly in the over-long sequence depicting a Negro band—and the last part of the film, in which the hero dons a mask at a wedding ball and has a brief moment of joy dancing with the pretty bride, is a bit facile. But the film's over-all discretion and sensitivity make it far better than such dance-hall films as *Mambo Madness* and *Momma Don't Allow*, or the dance-hall sequence in *Amore in Città*; despite its formal conventionality, *Pourvu qu'on ait l'ivresse* gave considerable hope for Pollet's future.

His first feature, *La Ligne de Mire*, was almost finished this summer when the producers decided that much of it had to be re-shot. Whether this is because the film was in fact "uneditable," as might well be the case with a novice director unfamiliar with film grammar, or whether Pollet simply overstepped the bounds of fake audacity as they have been laid down by Chabrol, Vadim, and Malle, we will probably never know. In any case, the film will certainly not be ready by the time this article goes to press.

Had they not inexplicably been graced with the grand prize at Cannes this year, Marcel Camus and his *Orfeu Negro* would never have been mentioned in this article. Camus has absolutely nothing in common with the full-fledged members of the new wave who, whatever their failings, cannot be called hack directors. Camus is 46, and was France's number-one assistant for over ten years before making his very unremarkable *Mort en Fraude* some four years ago. His prize-winning film is a dull, vaguely detestable mixture of symbolism à la *Joe Macbeth* and trumped-up local color. The only unexpected thing about it is its technical ineptness (aimless pan shots, superfluous cuts, and amateurish frame composi-

tion)—Camus, after all, has ghosted the technical direction of a great many French films, some of them signed by “name” directors.

Although Roger Vadim has made two films which I feel are on an even lower level than *Orfeu Negro*—both of them with Brigitte Bardot—he has made two others, *Sait-on Jamais?*⁹ and *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, which do display a quality I have found lacking in the work of all the men discussed so far: a thoughtful concern for cinematic form. In *Sait-on Jamais?*, his second film, his tricky, “calligraphic” handling of the Cinemascope frame was far more inventive than Ophüls’ clumsy masking in *Lola Montez*. The superbly baroque color photography and the sumptuous set were highly *co-ordinated*, a rarer occurrence than one might suppose when virtuoso set-designers and camera crews get together. And although the brilliance of the film remained, for the most part, on a purely visual level, with all the limitations this word implies, it did attain the stature of authentic poetry in those scenes describing the heroine’s sexual obsession for the villain. However, Vadim’s attempt to transfigure melodrama through studied formalism—highly laudable in itself—ultimately failed through lack of consistency. On re-seeing the film one realises that there are far too many moments so flat that one had forgotten them, and which might almost have been the work of some other director.

SAIT-ON JAMAIS: *Franco Fabrizzi*
and *Françoise Arnoul*.



Vadim’s latest film—an adaptation of Laclos’ masterpiece but now called *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* 1960 because of an absurd legal squabble with a society for the protection of French literary traditions—is of course far more ambitious but also far less successful than *Sait-on Jamais?* The film will probably not be shown outside of France for a long time to come, since the Fifth Republic feels it would give foreigners the wrong idea about French morals (the French Right has always smarted at the idea that tourists come to Paris because of Pigalle) and has banned it for export. American connoisseurs of Laclos need not, however, feel overly disappointed, for as was to be expected Vadim failed in the near-impossible task of adapting that splendid epistolary novel. The chief reason for his failure is that he insisted, not only on doing the film in modern dress—which, *a priori*, had much to recommend it—but on laying Laclos’ story in an ultrarealistic, socially defined, contemporary setting. Now, the key to Bresson’s extraordinarily successful adaptation of a Diderot tale in *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* was that, although the characters *seemed* to live in modern France, they were completely abstracted from any realistic environment. There were not dozens of extras crowding up every outdoor shot, none of Vadim’s stilted references to UN and UNESCO, no tape-recorders; instead, an object as modern as the telephone became a timeless, almost disembodied means of communication. And while Clouzot’s adaption of *Manon Lescaut* took, of course, quite the opposite tack, he and Jean Ferry retained only the one driving element in Prévost’s tale which was in fact universal: passionate physical love, and replaced the eighteenth-century moral code with more neutral twentieth-century values. Vadim’s characters, on the other hand, seem to be members of some improbable club who, for obscure reasons, strive to apply to modern society a set of moral values borrowed *in toto* from the salons of the Directoire. The result is a feeling of strained, meaningless artificiality. Vadim, I believe, holds that these eighteenth-century libertines would be just as diabolically subversive today as in 1790; in other words that they still are rebels in the

sense that Camus feels Don Juan was one. In reality, however, Vadim and his dialogue-writer, Roger Vailland—called by some “le Montherlant de la gauche”—are merely indulging in a form of public masturbation, dreaming of a fantasy-world in which the mechanics of love are all—a world which bears a striking resemblance to certain exhibitionistic playgrounds of southern France (or California), than which nothing is less rebellious or more bourgeois.

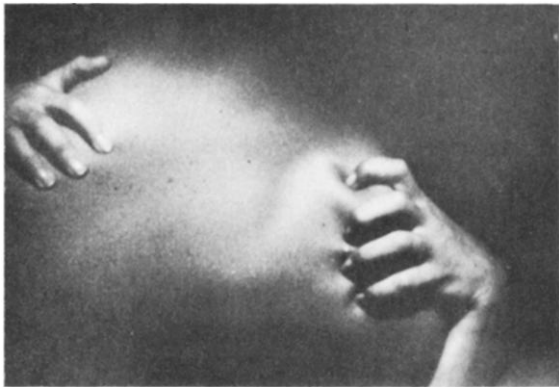
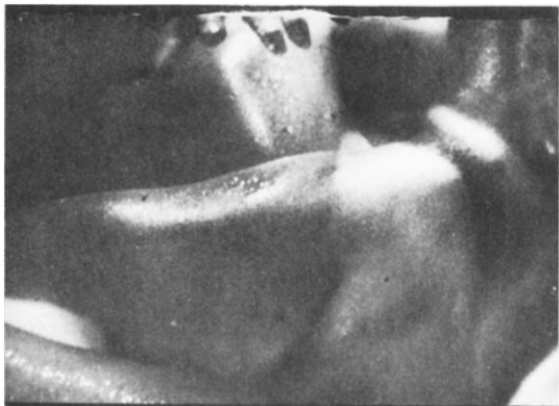
However, this film does represent a consistent—though anarchic—attempt to create a modern approach to the baroque in film. Such tricks as a zoom-shot which passes *through* a baby-carriage (I am afraid this is the only way to describe it) do unquestionably suggest new dimensions in film technique, and the scene in which “Valmont” seduces “la Présidente” while his voice, off-screen, analyses his technique in a letter to “Madame de Merteuil” does achieve a kind of spatial irony which is both effectively disturbing and original. For the most part, however, Vadim’s search for a new language—which I have no doubt is the one sincere aspect of his art—boils down to a where-shall-we-put-the-camera-next? attitude, and though the results are often provocative, they do not as yet reveal any basic coherence.

As for Vadim’s approach to eroticism, its only interest lies in his having managed to make a lot of supposedly sophisticated people take seriously the sexuality of the Varga girl; it was he who invented B.B., that “epitome of mediocrity,” in the words of producer Carlo Ponti, Sophia Loren’s husband. (The trouble with obessional art is that unless one is Lautréamont or Artaud it tends to be completely uncommunicable.)

If the new wave has had a part in affording Alain Resnais and Marcel Hanoun the opportunity to make their first feature films,* then we may easily forgive it for fostering some fake prodigies also. For these men have made a solid contribution to the development of the cinema as an independent art form; they have really broken new ground in the same sense as did the Russians after the First World War and Bresson and Welles during and after the Second.

I have already had occasion to write at length of Alain Resnais in these pages, [FQ, Fall 1959] and some of my readers thus know the high esteem I have for this director. I was therefore not surprised when, for the first five or ten minutes of *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, I was firmly convinced that I was about to see the greatest film ever made. A shot of the enlaced bodies of the two lovers, photographed to look like a semi-figurative high-relief and intercut with a highly stylized documentary sequence on the horrors of Hiroshima while the heroine’s voice chants, off-screen, Marguerite Duras’ curiously ritualistic commentary, struck me as one of the most perfectly successful attempts ever made to convey, by purely cinematic means, a sense of utter timelessness. Now the two naked bodies, are spattered with sand, now rain washes the sand away: one might almost be witnessing a stage of the Creation. The woman’s voice drones on, in insistent alliteration, telling her Japanese lover what *she* saw in Hiroshima; “Tu n’as rien vu à Hiroshima” is his reiterated, deadpan reply. Up to this point the hypnotic brilliance of the film had held me literally spell-bound—though actually the seeds of the film’s basic failing were already apparent. There followed, however, the return to “real” time; the lovers sat up in bed and began to talk things over in more everyday terms. But what is this French actress doing in Hiroshima? Why, she is playing the role of a nurse in a film on Peace. And lo and behold, the next sequence, which might have been extracted from a Japanese Communist film, shows us a mass demonstration against the atom bomb staged for the purposes of this film-within-a-film. It is tastefully done, of course. Resnais is incapable of doing anything vulgar. It is so tasteful, in fact, that a few generous minds have been able to find ironic intentions here, but if these do exist, they are a bit oversubtle for this critic. The tragic thing about *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* is that Resnais seems to have tried to incorporate into this, his first feature film, *everything* that he cares about: film form at its most abstract, peace, the atom bomb and, as we shall see, the French Liberation and

* I understand that Jean Rouch, for whom I also have considerable respect, is being dealt with elsewhere in this issue, so I will omit discussion of his very remarkable work.



*From the opening of HIROSHIMA, MON AMOUR
[Special photos courtesy Pathé Overseas.]*

the stupidity of the provincial bourgeoisie. There is absolutely no commensurability between the conception of the first section of this film and the content—it has no precise conception—of the second. Similarly, the overwhelming mass tragedy of Hiroshima — a veritable hiatus in human history, which can be dealt with only on its own terms (as the admirable *Children of Hiroshima* has proven) — is incommensurable with the very intimate tragedy of this girl who loved a German soldier during the occupation of France and had her hair shaved at the Liberation because of it. Perhaps Resnais was attempting to establish a contrast and/or identity between microcosmic and macrocosmic suffering, but this simply does not come off. The joint suffering of a French girl and a married Japanese, as they live through a few hours of “impossible” love, merely serves to underscore the incompatibility which destroys the film’s cohesiveness: the girl’s experience at the Liberation and this couple’s frustrated love (as well as her tragic love for the German soldier) belong to the realm of contingency, whereas the unique Hiroshima tragedy simply does not. I doubt that Resnais, even with his somewhat confused political allegiances, would deny this explicitly; but he does so implicitly by the way in which he juxtaposes the different levels of subject matter. In this light the parallel, contrast, or “essay on forgetfulness” that he had in mind becomes hopelessly arbitrary.

After the Peace parade, the couple spend the rest of the film wandering through Hiroshima together, while she tells him, by bits and pieces, of the great tragedy in *her* life, the persecution to which she was subjected after the war. It is the telling of her tale which constitutes this



film's contribution to cinematic art; without the slightest wipe, fade, or dissolve, we are suddenly transported to Nevers, France, fifteen years earlier. The first sequence evoking the girl's past in this way shows her cycling through wintry woods, followed, through a telescopic lens, in a seemingly endless pan; finally she coasts down into a glen, hundreds of yards from the camera, to meet her waiting lover. This is one of the most beautiful sequences I have ever seen, and like all the material shot in France it is greatly enhanced by the absolutely breathtaking, pale grey photography of Sascha Vierny, who in this film has shown that he is the top French cameraman of his generation (the Japanese photography was done by someone else, and though competently "Japanesque" it is far more conventional). The intermittent flashbacks to France that follow in the course of the film appear not only without warning, but *without any respect for time sequence*. Thus, though actually the girl was first shaved, then shut up in her room by her parents, until her hair should grow back, then in the cellar because she made too much noise, then sent back to her room, we first see her in the cellar, then we see the shaving, then back to the cellar, then to her room, and so on. The order of events on the screen follows the stream of her impressions and associations as she talks to the Japanese—though sometimes, and this I feel is especially original, the flashbacks seem absolutely unmotivated by the dialogue: at one point, in particular, there is a brief flash of a pavillion standing on a hill, which though poetically shattering in the context of the film, seems to have *absolutely no meaning in that context*; only much later does the attentive spectator realise that this pavillion overlooks the spot where one day the girl came upon her German lover writhing in agony, a partisan's bullet in his belly. The freedom with which Resnais handled this part of the film is probably without parallel in the history of cinema; not since Carné, in *Le Jour se Lève*, first made the flashback an organic element of film structure has such original use been made of this device.

Once the girl has gotten her Nevers experience off her chest, however, the film becomes

rather laborious, despite Resnais' unerring visual taste and his sense of spatial ambiguity and tempo. The girl decides not to remain in Hiroshima with her lover, although he follows her about for hours on end, from one empty nightclub to the next, trying to convince her to stay. These scenes are very sober and quite lovely, in their way, but lack the poetic tension of the film's best moments. The last major sequence is a series of dolly shots in which the camera-eye alternately explores Nevers and Hiroshima, and although beautifully photographed, this device (an attempt, it would seem, to prepare the spectator for the film's final moral) is ultimately clumsy and old-fashioned. Having finally agreed that it is impossible for them to remain together, the two lovers nevertheless prepare to make love one last time, thus returning to the film's point of departure; before they bed down, however, the Japanese mouths the film's last line and, presumably, its moral: "Tu es Nevers et je suis Hiroshima." One is appalled to think that Resnais has spent all that time, effort, and money to tell us that East is East and West is West; my own feeling is that his intellectual confusion—already apparent in some of his shorts—is such that he was not sure what he was trying to say. Nothing at all, perhaps? But his film is far too deeply imbued with an atmosphere of sentimental "significance" for one to take it at face value as an *objet d'art* devoid of intellectual meaning. The great pity is that a director with such an extraordinary feeling for the film should still be dragging about the ball and chain of his "progressive" upbringing and feels the need to convey messages—albeit ambiguous ones (his inversion of traditional left-wing values, as concerns the Liberation merely reflects, I think, Resnais' habitual taste for paradox). *Hiroshima* has many other, secondary, virtues: the remarkably well-integrated music of the Italian composer Fusco (who has done the music for Antonioni's best films) and Marguerite Duras' much discussed dialogues which, though a bit had-I-but-known, are nevertheless extremely cohesive; their high degree of stylization represents an interesting attempt to solve a problem which has never been adequately

tackled since the introduction of sound. But no matter how much the technician in me may admire *Hiroshima*, *Mon Amour*, the most brilliant film seen in France since Bresson's *Journal d'un Curé de Campagne*, the fact remains that the script's intellectual confusion prevents an organic marriage of form and content and ultimately makes the film stick in one's craw.

Were it not for Marcel Hanoun's *Une Simple Histoire* I would probably look upon *Hiroshima* as the new wave's most substantial contribution to film art. *Une Simple Histoire*, however, is such a thoroughly revolutionary film that not only does it defy comparison with any postwar French film, but I doubt that any single film in the history of cinema has ever attempted such an immense forward leap. It is hard to know where to begin an examination of this film, outwardly so simple and inwardly so complex. The story on which it is built is slender indeed: a woman has left her native provincial city and arrives in Paris with her little girl; in her purse is a small, precise sum of money; as the days go by, the money dwindles; the woman is unable to find work, has great difficulty in finding a hotel room and when she finally has found one, her money runs out; she and her little girl spend the night in an empty lot, and the next day they are taken in by a kindly woman whose apartment overlooks the lot in question. What could be simpler . . . or more neorealist? It reads like the ideal Zavattini plot. In his treatment of it, however, Hanoun situates himself at the opposite pole from neorealism and attains a degree of formal stylization without parallel in film history. This stylization can be defined in terms of two dialectical relationships and of the interplay between these two relationships. The most striking of these dialectics associates dialogues and commentary: the woman's voice tells her own story, off-screen, and often goes so far as to repeat the words she or her interlocutors have said, are saying or are about to say on-screen. This process, which insensitive ears find merely redundant, aroused really violent protest on the part of the few art-house audiences that have seen this film, and to my knowledge no critic has gotten the point either. Once the surprise produced by this device has passed,

however, one begins to realize that the relationships between commentary and dialogues are constantly and cunningly varied. At times the commentary may repeat verbatim a phrase spoken by the characters on-screen (but the time-lag between the two is always different: commentary can precede dialogue by one, two, three or more words, or follow them by an equally variable length). At other times the commentary rephrases, inverts or otherwise scrambles the word-order of the dialogues, and the fact that the two almost always overlap to some degree made it possible, among other types of patterns, for a secondary word in the commentary to drown out a key-word in the dialogue—which is taken up a second later by the commentary itself, thereby creating a kind of three-dimensional word-space. Hanoun also played with the various levels of acoustical intensity of the two verbal parameters. The limits within which this highly complex, dialectical counterpoint evolves are defined by a set of unique moments: only once does the commentary tell us what is being said on-screen in the absence of any dialogues (the camera is looking through a window); only once do we hear dialogues without any repetition from the commentary, only once does the commentary wholly precede the dialogues and only once does it wholly follow them. Hanoun has found the first really elegant solution to the problem of *words* in film; the redundancy of the process—for on the level of meaning it *is* redundant—serves to reduce the anecdotal character of each word to a minimum (this is also achieved through the “uselessness” of everyday speech); the word becomes a transparent object—not mere sound, of course, but a *concrete abstraction*—which modern mixing techniques allow to be manipulated as precisely as musical notes; the result, however, is not music, either; it comes, I feel, as close as it is possible to come to *pure cinema*, for to my mind *the essence of cinema is the abstraction of the purely concrete, the integration of the elements of “everyday,” concrete reality into elaborate, artificial, and abstract patterns in such a way that these elements lose their “significance” without losing their identity.*

UNE SIMPLE HISTOIRE:
*Elizabeth Huart and
 Micheline Bezançon.*



Hanoun intuitively applies this precept to the other dimensions of his film, in a dialectic between anecdotal time and visual time. The only scale we have for measuring the time that has elapsed since the woman's arrival in Paris is the amount of money left in her purse and, in a sense, the gradual diminution of this sum becomes our—or her—calendar. In and out of the warp of this more or less regular progression of abstract time, however, Hanoun has woven a far more complex progression of visual time, based upon a use of space-time ellipsis the freedom of which is unparalleled in films. His cutting ellipses can cover any length of "real" time, from five seconds to twenty-four hours, and are often both textural and structural; their intimate relationship to frame-space and to the commentary and dialogues attests to an incredibly high degree of formal elaboration. At one point, for example, the woman's off-screen voice tells us that she had gone to a factory in answer to a help-wanted ad and left her daughter in the care of a neighboring café waitress. While these words are being spoken we watch the woman enter a café alone; her daughter is sitting at a table waiting for her. "The job was already taken," the commentary continues.

The woman sits down next to her child and, looking over toward the camera, orders a cup of coffee. Now we cut to a close-up of the woman, shot from the same angle, and she *immediately raises the cup of coffee to her lips*. "Suddenly I realized that Sylvie was no longer beside me," says the commentary and the woman looks up from her cup. Cutting back to the previous frame, we see her *dragging her child back into the shot* and returning with her to their table. Now, a "veteran" film-maker, whose name I will not mention, condescendingly remarked after a screening of the film, that Hanoun would learn not to make this kind of mistake when he had spent more time in cutting-rooms. And the fact is that this kind of ellipsis, never before consciously attempted in films, defies all the academic laws of editing. Hanoun, however, is no tyro; he is fully aware of those laws, knows them so well that he knows how to break them, and what positive effect a given violation may produce; here he has created a new and, above all, infinitely fertile approach to the space-time relationship which is at the heart of cinema. As can be seen from the foregoing example, the commentary-dialogue relationship can also enter into this play of ellipsis,

by anticipation or retrospection, and this constitutes the link between the two dialectical processes described above.

It should be further pointed out that this double set of dialectics and the dizzily complex set of relationships to which it gives rise cannot—or should not—be “justified” in the way that critics generally feel it necessary to justify film form, in terms, that is, of story, content, psychology, and the rest. It is essential to realize that by its *absolute cohesiveness* this formal fabric *suffices unto itself*, imposes itself as a musical structure might upon the attentive spectator as the work’s basic substance; it may, in fact, be said to determine the development of the “action.” This inversion of the usual approach to film aesthetics—form justifying content—is not entirely new (cf. Antonioni’s *Cronaca di un Amore* and to a lesser extent *Ivan the Terrible*) but *Une Simple Histoire* is the first film in which its necessity has been made evident. Those who, like the director cited above, feel that Hanoun’s syntax is merely a lack of syntax excusable in view of the difficult conditions under which the film was made, are merely displaying their inability to distinguish between the isolated, haphazard technical fluke and systematic, meaningful innovation. Hanoun’s inversion of the usual relation between form and content is undoubtedly hard to take, but for anyone with the proper experience and understanding *Une Simple Histoire* should be a shattering film. Such a person will be moved not by the plight of the penniless woman, but by the relationship of the artist to his work.

I could cite many examples of the highly intellectualized texture of this film, such as a cut from a close-up to a medium close-up which embraces an entire night, or Hanoun’s startling rehabilitation of the zoom lens (instead of trying to do ersatz dolly-shots with it, he quite frankly enlarges or reduces the frame with amazing poetic results) but it is like trying to analyze a piece of music one has heard three or four times but of which one has never seen a score. Indeed, *Une Simple Histoire* is the first film I have ever seen of which I would like to possess a “score” (and I do not mean a script), in order to see *exactly* how the dialogues are

linked to the commentary or to analyze the precise relationships between a given set of ellipses.

The film is not, of course, without its faults. Hanoun’s errors—and they are very few—generally involve a return to conventional “affectivity” and even to a kind of social criticism. At one point the woman has insomnia and is whiling away the night hours with an illustrated magazine depicting the sentimental adventures of people who “do nothing all day long, drink whisky, drive fancy cars and are all good-looking.” At this point she lowers the magazine and we see her rather plain face in a particularly cruel light; never throughout the rest of the film does she seem so ugly. It is understandable that Hanoun could not resist airing one of his pet grudges, and my feeling is that this sort of thing will not recur, since his attitude toward affectivity throughout the rest of the film is in absolute contradiction to facileness of this kind. In particular, he attenuates the sentimental side of the woman’s plight by starting the film at the point when she is taken in by the sympathetic old lady, and telling the film in a single flashback (which never returns to the present but is left “hanging” on an extraordinarily ambiguous final shot) thus destroying in advance any possible “suspense.” (This is like what Bresson did in his *Un Condamné à Mort s’est Echappé*, the title of which totally eliminated the suspense element before the spectator had even bought his ticket, allowing him to concentrate on the more abstract elements involved in the tale; Bresson, of course, is Hanoun’s direct precursor, but he is only that, for until now his concern for abstraction has always remained secondary, partly because his primary interest is mystical; this is why even a masterpiece like *Le Journal d’un Curé de Campagne* contains such formal dead spots as the long conversation between the two priests in the summer house.) Hanoun’s gravest error, because one of conception rather than detail, stemmed from his decision to add music to his film once it was completed. A film as highly and elaborately structured as this requires all its elements to be under the direct control of its author; the addition of music as complex even

as Vivaldi or Cimarosa to such a delicately balanced organism was an obvious error, and though it may have rendered the film more palatable for some audiences (may even have helped it obtain the Grand Prix de l'Eurovision at Cannes this year, which, on one level, would amply justify it) this "background music" remains an irritating flaw in a work of art which is otherwise almost perfect. (Hanoun, by the way, is aware of this flaw; the feature he is now shooting will contain absolutely no incidental music.)

Hanoun's achievement justifies, I feel, in fact demands henceforth a redoubled severity on the part of the film critic. This film's very existence, which proves that the seventh art is capable of a discipline and a degree of abstraction comparable to that of contemporary painting or music, no longer allows us even to pretend to tolerate the enlightened amateurism of a Francois Truffaut, let alone the "professionalism" of a Minnelli or a Preminger. In this respect, Hanoun's revolution may be likened to Webern's, for it is above all by his *attitude* that the director of *Une Simple Histoire* has broken new ground. Like the Viennese master, his art involves a rigorous approach to *all* the parameters of his art; for Hanoun no element of a film may remain "unorganized." Just as Webern was the first to incorporate silence into music as a positive element, so too Hanoun incorporates its cinematic equivalent into his film: *boredom*. For minutes on end *absolutely nothing* "happens": the woman makes chocolate, reads a newspaper, stands looking out the window, etc. Hanoun is not, of course, the first to include stretches of this sort in a film, nor even the first to attempt to use boredom structurally; extremely interesting precursory examples of this are found in Dovjenko's *Earth* and, above all, in Tati's *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot*; but while these were far more orderly attempts at a *bon usage de l'ennui* than the absolutely haphazard use made of it in *Umberto D.*, for example, they remain, I feel, incidental, almost decorative, whereas in *Une Simple Histoire* boredom (the spectator's boredom, not the character's—a space of "silence," or inactivity, which

prolongs and defines the "music," or activity, about it like the seemingly arbitrary stops and starts in Webern's instrumental pieces) becomes an indispensable part of the film's fabric.

Until now I have said nothing of Hanoun's background, nor of the way in which he made *Une Simple Histoire*. Like Truffaut and Chabrol, Hanoun was never anyone's assistant, but, unlike his more illustrious rivals, he has been working in films for a good many years, and has made a number of documentaries, one of which—on Gérard de Nerval—had the honor of being booed off a Champs Elysées screen by spectators who were bored by Hanoun's first, somewhat tentative experimentation. *Une Simple Histoire* was made practically singlehanded, and aside from facilities provided by the French television network (on the basis of the apparently "documentary" nature of its script, a misapprehension which has earned the film a good deal of ludicrously irrelevant critical praise, as well) cost around 300,000 francs, or \$625! The film was made on 16 mm, which in France is the equivalent of 8 mm in the United States so far as laboratory work and special effects are concerned; it is simply not a professional format. The fact that Hanoun was able to achieve the unprecedented degree of rigor displayed by this hour-long film with a wind-up camera, a zoom lens and a few cheap spotlights, that working all by himself he was able to do very acceptable photography and direct an extremely talented actress named Micheline Bezançon with such pre-

UNE SIMPLE HISTOIRE: Micheline Bezançon.



cision, the fact that he is lucid enough to be aware of the faults—and, above all, the special merits—of his film, indicate that we have seen only the first act in this stupendous, one-man revolution. And though Marcel Hanoun probably would have made his film independently of any new wave, it is probable that his prestige

as a young director would not have been what it is without the present movement, and only too probable that he would not now be shooting a feature film with a 60,000,000-franc budget which, judging by the shooting-script, bids fair to be as exciting—if not as revolutionary—as *Une Simple Histoire*.

A Brief, Tragical History of the Science Fiction Film

RICHARD HODGENS

*Cut is the branch that might have grown full
straight,
And burned is Apollo's laurel-bough,
That sometime grew within this learned man.
Faustus is gone: regard his hellish fall,
Whose fiendful fortune may exhort the wise,
Only to wonder at unlawful things,
Whose deepness doth entice such forward wits
To practise more than heavenly power permits.*
—DOCTOR FAUSTUS, *Epilogue*

Some of the most original and thoughtful contemporary fiction has been science fiction, and this field may well prove to be of much greater literary importance than is generally admitted. In motion pictures, however, "science fiction" has so far been unoriginal and limited; and both the tone and the implications of these films suggest a strange throwback of taste to something moldier and more "Gothic" than the Gothic novel. But the genre is an interesting and potentially very fruitful one.

Science fiction publishing expanded spectacularly in the late '40's, and dwindled again in the early '50's. Science fiction filming as we know it today began in 1950 with *Destination Moon*, and has continued to the present, hideously transformed, as a minor category of production.

Earlier examples, like Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and *Frau im Mond*, H. G. Wells' powerful essay on future history, *Things to Come*, and such nonsupernatural horror films as *The Invisible Ray*, have not been considered "science fiction," although they were. One of the many painful aspects of most of the recent films involving space travel, alien visitors, or earthly monsters which have followed *Destination Moon* is that they are considered "science fiction," although most of them are something peculiarly different from the literature of the same label.

Motion picture adaptations have ruined any number of good works of literature without casting a pall, in the public mind, over literature in general. The science fiction films, however, seem to have come close to ruining the reputation of the category of fiction from which they have malignantly sprouted. To the film audience, "science fiction" means "horror," distinguished from ordinary horror only by a relative lack of plausibility.

Science fiction involves extrapolated or fictitious science, or fictitious use of scientific possibilities, or it may be simply fiction that takes place in the future or introduces some radical assumption about the present or the past. For those who insist upon nothing but direct treatment of contemporary life, science fiction has